Preparing Students for 21st Century Literacy Now

**What is literacy? What does it mean to be literate? Why is it important to be literate?**

The majority of reading in which students engage takes place online (Kaiser Family Foundation,20 10); therefore, students must be prepared with skills, strategies, and

dispositions to succeed in a globally networked, multimodal, digital age of information and communication (OECD, 1996). As they stand now, the CCSS put a ceiling on the types

of literacy experiences students will have in K–12 classroom settings. Knowing where the standards fall short, as well as how to remedy the situation, will help teachers prepare students for 21st-century literacy demands—*now*. Educators can open up the ceiling by expanding literacy experiences to include online literacy and its distinct purposes, processes, and forms

of text to better match the type of reading in which students engage outside school and to fulfill the expectations of being literate in today’s world.

**Literacy is Changing**

With the Internet as the defining technology for literacy and learning in the 21st century (Leu et al., 2011), students need to be prepared as skilled and strategic readers, writers, and communicators in online environments. The umbrella of online literacy is multifaceted

and constantly changing and covers a variety of “new literacies” (Bilal, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett- Cacopardo, 2009; Warschauer, 2011) that students need in order to be literate—*now—*such as using search engines, blogs, wikis, Facebook, Google Docs, and other emerging technologies. Future literacy demands will encompass technologies that have yet to be invented (Leu et al., 2011).

**Online Reading Defined**

Broadly defined, online reading is a problem-based learning process, with the Internet as the primary text. Online readers access the Internet to provide answers to a variety of questions. Good online readers use effective strategies to (a) *locate* information to answer their question(s), (b) critically *evaluate* the usefulness of the information, (c) *synthesize* the information to answer their question(s), and then (d) *communicate* their answer to others (Coiro & Dobler, 2007; Leu et

al., 2004). Although both online and offline reading build on common skill sets, online reading requires additional skills, strategies, and dispositions (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Today, the majority of the reading in which students engage takes place online (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010) and thus requires additional comprehension skills and strategies (Coiro, 2003; Leu et al., 2004). Over two billion people, or nearly one third of the world’s population, are reading online (Internet World Stats, 2012). Therefore, students must be prepared to succeed in a globally networked, multimodal, digital age of information and communication (OECD, 1996).

The International Reading Association (2009) states the following:

*To become fully literate in today’s world,*

*students must become proficient in the new*

*literacies of 21st-century technologies. As a*

*result, literacy educators have a responsibility*

*to effectively integrate these new technologies*

*into the curriculum, preparing students for the*

*literacy future they deserve. (p. 1)*

Research demonstrates that struggling adolescent readers are motivated by digital reading

environments, as opposed to the print-centric reading environments in which they have been defined as incompetent (O’Brien, Beach, & Scharber, 2007). Online and other digital environments may allow struggling readers to break free from the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986) and begin to close the achievement gap (Edyburn, 2007).

Furthermore, current discourse indicates a resistance on the part of an older, more traditional

generation to include the new digital genres among academic genres, because they see the use of

new media outlets as inferior, deficient, and even detracting from students’ ability to use academic language (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Warschauer, 2011).

Furthermore, the new literacies of online reading and communicating offer innovative ways to engage reluctant readers (O’Brien et al., 2007), which could perhaps be the first step in narrowing the achievement gap (Edyburn, 2007) between proficient readers and their struggling

counterparts.